



# Australian Bureau of Statistics

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## **ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AUSTRALIANS: A STATISTICAL PROFILE FROM THE 1996 CENSUS**

The five-yearly Census of Population and Housing remains the most important source of information about Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have been fully included in results for every census since 1971, providing a rich historical record of changes to this population group. A history of census counts of Indigenous Australians can be found in Year Book Australia 1998 (ABS 1998a pp. 156-58).

The three major areas of census data used in this article are population figures, person characteristics and household characteristics. Comparisons with the total Australian population are made in order to give some understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the Indigenous population. Indigenous statistics from New Zealand and Canada, where available and consistent with the Australian data, are used to provide an international context for statistical indicators about Australia's Indigenous people.

### **Population**

Information from the Census provides an overview of a wide range of socio-economic indicators for Indigenous Australians. Most importantly, however, the Census is the basis for official population figures. While each census aims to count every person in Australia once, some people are inevitably missed and some counted twice. More people are missed than counted twice. In addition, some people do not answer the Indigenous status question; a proportion of these non-respondents will be Indigenous. To arrive at the best possible estimate of the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, the census count is adjusted to take account of these two factors. The resulting figure is called the 'estimated resident population' (ERP). ERP for dates other than census day must also take account of births, deaths and migration in the intervening period.

### **Estimated resident population**

The estimated resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population as at 30 June 1996 was 386,000. The average annual growth rate of 2.3% for the Indigenous population of Australia for the period 1991 to 1996 was nearly twice the rate for the total population (1.2%) (ABS 1998b).

Over half of the Indigenous population resided in New South Wales (28.5%) and Queensland (27.2%) and just over a quarter in Western Australia and the Northern Territory (table S1.1). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprised 28.5% of the population of the Northern

Territory, the highest proportion of any State or Territory.

### S1.1 ESTIMATED RESIDENT POPULATION - 30 JUNE 1996(a)

| State and Territory | Indigenous population(b)<br>'000 | Total population<br>'000 | Proportion of total State or Territory population<br>% | Proportion of Indigenous population<br>% |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| NSW                 | 109.9                            | 6,204.7                  | 1.8  | 28.5                                     |
| Vic.                | 22.6                             | 4,560.2                  | 0.5  | 5.9                                      |
| Qld                 | 104.8                            | 3,338.7                  | 3.1  | 27.2                                     |
| SA                  | 22.1                             | 1,474.3                  | 1.5  | 5.7                                      |
| WA                  | 56.2                             | 1,765.3                  | 3.2  | 14.6                                     |
| Tas.                | 15.3                             | 474.4                    | 3.2  | 4.0                                      |
| NT                  | 51.9                             | 181.8                    | 28.5   | 13.4                                     |
| ACT                 | 3.1                              | 308.3                    | 1.0  | 0.8                                      |
| <b>Aust.(c)</b>     | <b>386.0</b>                     | <b>18,310.7</b>          | <b>2.1</b>   | <b>100.0</b>                             |

(a) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 100. As a result, discrepancies may occur between sums of component items and totals.

(b) Experimental estimates.

(c) Includes Jervis Bay Territory, Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Source: 1997a, 1998b.

### A young population

As table S1.2 shows, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, with a median age of 20 years, is younger than the total population by 14 years (ABS 1998b). This is similar to New Zealand, where the median age of the New Zealand Maori population is 22 years compared to 33 years for the total New Zealand population (SNZ 1997a, 1998a). Current life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 57 years for males and 62 years for females, nearly 20 years less than for the total population (ABS 1998b).

The indigenous populations of Australia and New Zealand have markedly different age structures compared to the total populations in both countries. Children aged under 15 years account for much larger proportions of indigenous populations than of the total population. Conversely, there are very low proportions of older people aged 65 years and over in these indigenous populations.

Although the New Zealand Maori and Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population have similar age structures, the age structure of the New Zealand Maori population is closer to that of the total New Zealand population than the age structure of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is to the that of the total Australian population, with smaller differences in the proportion of children and the median age.

## S1.2 ESTIMATED RESIDENT POPULATION - 1996

| Row                   | Australia                                       |                  | New Zealand |                  |
|-----------------------|---|------------------|-------------|------------------|
|                       | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people(a) |                  | Maori(b)    |                  |
|                       | Islander people(a)                              | Total population | Maori(b)    | Total population |
| Population ('000)     | 386.0   | 18,310.7         | 548.0       | 3,714.0          |
| Median age (years)    | 20  | 34               | 22          | 33               |
| 0-14 years (%)        | 40.0  | 21.4             | 36.9        | 22.8             |
| 65 years and over (%) | 2.6   | 12.0             | 2.9         | 11.6             |

(a) Experimental estimates.

(b) New Zealand Maori ethnic group.

Source: ABS 1997a, 1998b; SNZ 1997a, 1998a.

### A minority population

Data from the 1996 censuses conducted in Australia, New Zealand and Canada show that the indigenous populations in these countries are minority populations. Of the three countries, the highest proportion of indigenous people in the general population was in New Zealand where the Maori population represented 14.5% of the total New Zealand population in 1996 (table S1.3). The indigenous populations of Canada and Australia accounted for far smaller proportions of the total population than in New Zealand. Canada's Aboriginal peoples were 2.8% of the total population, whereas in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were only 2.0% of the total.

However, the census counts of indigenous populations in these countries increased more rapidly than those for the total population in the 1991-96 period. In all three countries, the count of the total population increased by 6-7% over the 5 year period, whereas the counts of indigenous populations increased by 20-33%. As a result of these higher rates of increase, the proportions of the total population who are indigenous have increased in all three countries between 1991 and 1996.

## S1.3 CENSUS COUNTS - 1991-96

| Row       | 1991             |                       |      | 1996             |                       |      |
|-----------|------------------|-----------------------|------|------------------|-----------------------|------|
|           | Total population | Indigenous population |      | Total population | Indigenous population |      |
|           | '000             | '000                  | %(a) | '000             | '000                  | %(a) |
| Australia | 16,771.7         | 265.4                 | 1.6  | 17,752.8         | 353.0                 | 2.0  |

|                |          |       |      |          |       |      |
|----------------|----------|-------|------|----------|-------|------|
| New Zealand(b) | 3,373.9  | 434.8 | 12.9 | 3,618.3  | 523.4 | 14.5 |
| Canada(c)      | 26,994.0 | 625.7 | 2.3  | 28,528.1 | 799.0 | 2.8  |

(a) Indigenous population expressed as a percentage of the total population.

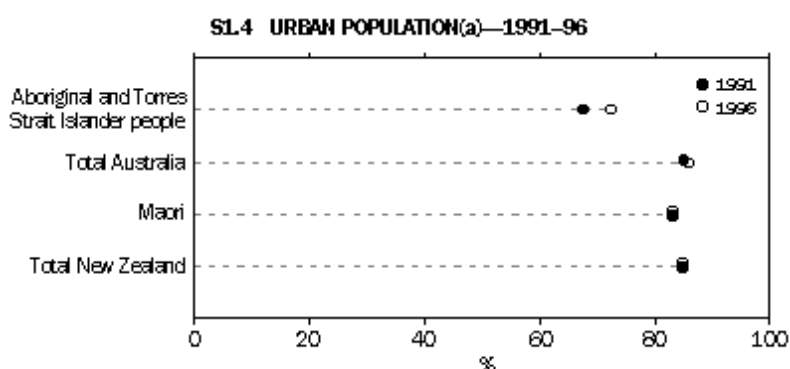
(b) New Zealand Maori ethnic group.

(c) Population identifying as Aboriginal. The 1991 Canadian Census asked for each person's ancestry. 1,002,675 people reported Aboriginal ancestry. The 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS), conducted as a follow up to the 1991 Census, showed that 625,710 people with Aboriginal ancestry also identified as Aboriginal. The 1996 Census used two questions, one about ancestry and the other about identity. Both these questions were different from those used in the 1991 Census or APS. 1,101,960 people reported Aboriginal ancestry in 1996 compared to 799,010 who reported Aboriginal identity. In addition, some Indian reserves and settlements were incompletely enumerated in both the 1991 Census and APS and the 1996 Census. The effect of the missing data is small for national data.

Source: ABS 1997b, SNZ 1997b, 1997c, Statistics Canada 1993, 1998.

## An urban population

The Australian Indigenous population is becoming increasingly urbanised. 'Urban' is defined as a population centre of 1,000 or more people. At the 1991 Census, 67.6% of Indigenous people lived in urban areas; by the time of the 1996 Census this had increased to 72.6% (graph S1.4). In comparison, 85.1% of the total population lived in urban areas in 1991, increasing marginally to 85.9% in 1996 (ABS 1998c). By contrast, New Zealand Maori are more urbanised than Australia's Indigenous people, with 83.1% living in urban areas in both 1991 and 1996; this is very close to the proportion of the total New Zealand population residing in urban areas in both years (85.0%) (SNZ 1997b, 1997d).



(a) Proportion of total applicable population.

Source: ABS 1998c, SNZ 1997b, 1997d.

The urbanisation of Indigenous Australians does not reflect a mass movement to cities and towns by Indigenous people. Since the urban and rural classification is population based, some of the increase is a result of changes in classification of some smaller urban centres. Some of the increase is also a function of changes in the willingness of Indigenous Australians to identify themselves as such on the census form. This effect is more common in urban areas than in rural areas.

There are differences in the types of urban centres in which Indigenous and other Australians

reside. In 1996, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were less likely than the general population to be living in major urban areas of 100,000 or more people (30.3% of Indigenous people compared to 62.7% of the total population). On the other hand 42.3% of Indigenous people lived in smaller centres of between 1,000 and 99,999 people; in contrast, only 23.2% of the total population lived in smaller urban centres (ABS 1998c).

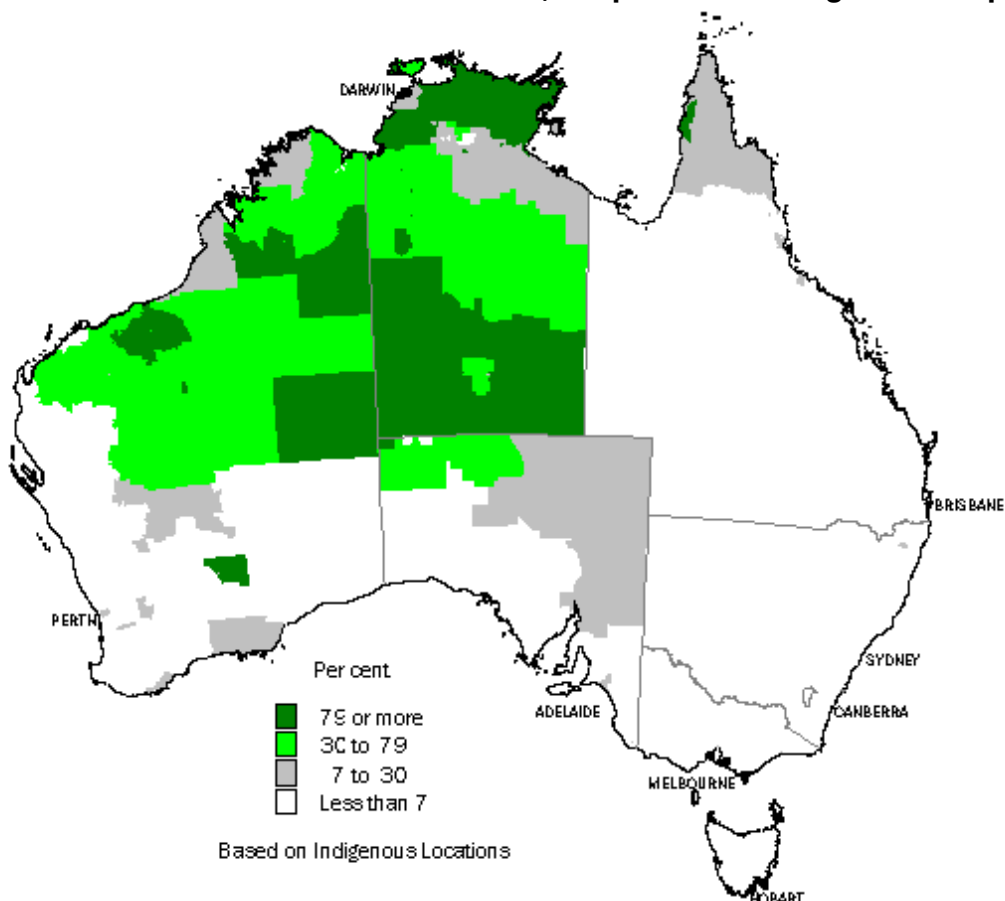
## Person characteristics

### Language

The Australian Census asks each person which language he or she speaks at home. In 1996, 13.3% of Australian Indigenous people reported speaking an Indigenous language at home (ABS 1998c). In contrast, the New Zealand Census asks in which languages a person can carry on a conversation about everyday things. Of New Zealand Maori, 24.7% reported being able to carry on a conversation in the Maori language (SNZ 1997b). The Canadian Census, on the other hand, asks both language spoken at home and ability to carry on a conversation. A similar proportion of Aboriginal Canadians spoke an Aboriginal language at home as Indigenous Australians (15.0% and 13.3% respectively); at the same time a similar proportion of Aboriginal Canadians could carry on a conversation in an Aboriginal language as New Zealand Maori (29.3% and 24.7% respectively) (Statistics Canada 1998).

In all three countries, indigenous language use was highest among older indigenous people and those living outside urban areas (ABS 1998c, SNZ 1997b, Statistics Canada 1998). In Australia, most Indigenous language speakers were concentrated in the north and west (map S1.5). Some areas where there were high numbers of not stated responses showed very low proportions of Indigenous language speakers.

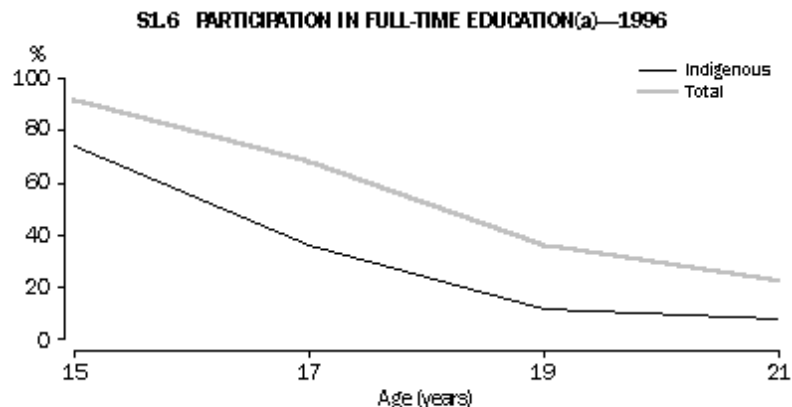
### S1.5 INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE SPEAKERS, Proportion of Indigenous Population



Source: 1996 Census of Population and Housing.

## Education

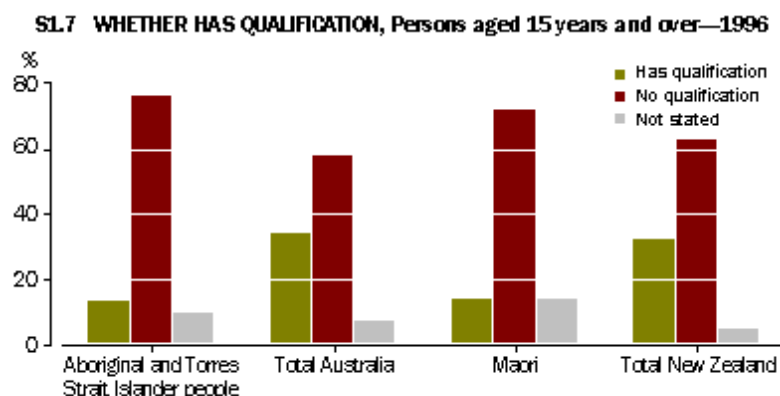
Indigenous Australians were less likely to be attending an educational institution full-time than other Australians. In 1996, 73.7% of Indigenous 15 year olds were in full-time education compared to 91.5% of all 15 year olds (graph S1.6). At older ages the disparity between Indigenous and total persons increased, so that at age 19, when tertiary education could be expected to occur, only 12.0% of Indigenous persons were in full-time education, one-third the rate for total persons.



(a) Persons attending an educational institution full-time as a percentage of all persons of the appropriate age.

Source: Unpublished data, 1996 Census of Population and Housing

The proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and New Zealand Maori with a post-school qualification were very similar in 1996 at 13.6% and 14.3% respectively (graph S1.7). In contrast, 34.4% of the total population of Australia and 32.2% of the total New Zealand population had a post-school qualification (ABS 1998c, SNZ 1997b, 1997c). Indigenous people in major urban centres of 100,000 people or more were more likely to have a qualification than those in other areas (ABS 1998c).



Source: ABS 1998c, SNZ 1997b, 1997c.

## Labour force

At the time of the 1996 Census, 52.7% of Australia's Indigenous population aged 15 years and over were in the labour force, in comparison to 61.9% of the total population of the same age

group (table S1.8). Of the Indigenous labour force participants, 22.7% were unemployed, more than double the unemployment rate for the total population (9.2%). Thus, proportionally fewer Indigenous Australians were active in the labour force (that is, working or looking for work) and, of those in the labour force, proportionally fewer had a job. By contrast, there was virtually no difference in the proportions of both New Zealand Maori (65.3%) and the total New Zealand population (65.4%) in the labour force. The unemployment rate for Maori (17.5%), while lower than that for Indigenous Australians, was still more than double the rate for the total New Zealand population.

### S1.8 LABOUR FORCE STATUS - 1996(a)

|                                       | Australia                                      |                    | New Zealand |                    |
|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------|-------------|--------------------|
|                                       | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people % | Total population % | Maori %     | Total population % |
| Employment/<br>population<br>ratio(b) | 40.7   | 56.2               | 53.9        | 60.4               |
| Unemployment<br>rate(c)               | 22.7   | 9.2                | 17.5        | 7.7                |
| Participation<br>rate(d)              | 52.7   | 61.9               | 65.3        | 65.4               |
| Full-time<br>employment(e)            | 56.6   | 67.8               | 75.9        | 76.8               |

(a) Persons aged 15 years and over. Excludes labour force not stated.

(b) Employed persons expressed as a percentage of the population aged 15 years and over.

(c) Unemployed persons expressed as a percentage of the labour force (employed plus unemployed).

(d) Labour force (employed plus unemployed) expressed as a percentage of the population aged 15 years and over.

(e) Persons in full-time employment expressed as a percentage of the total employed.

Source: ABS 1998c; SNZ 1997b, 1998b.

Overall, 56.6% of employed Indigenous people were employed full-time, lower than the rate for the total population of 67.8%. In contrast, there was virtually no difference in the proportion of Maori (75.9%) and the total New Zealand population (76.8%) who were employed full-time.

Having a post-school qualification lowered the unemployment rate for all groups. The unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians with a post-school qualification was 14.1%, in comparison to 5.9% for the equivalent group in the total population (graph S1.9). For Maori with a post-school qualification, the unemployment rate, at 8.8%, was half that for all Maori.

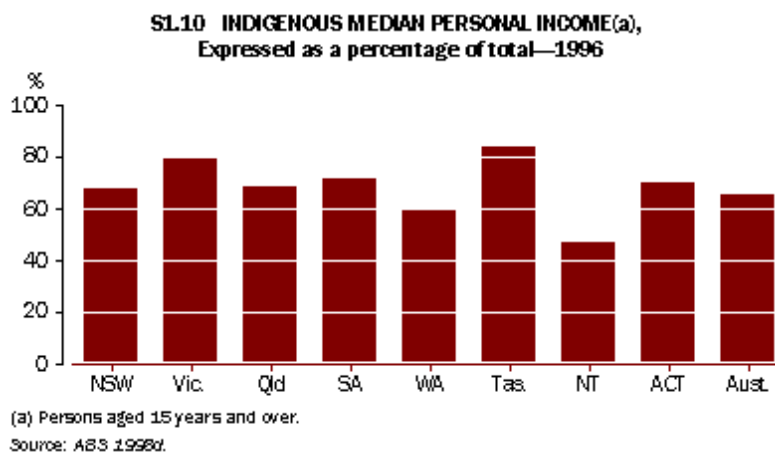


Source: Unpublished data, SNZ 1997b, 1998b.

## Income

The median personal income of Indigenous Australians was \$190 per week in 1996. This was 65.1% of the median income of all Australians (\$292) (ABS 1998d) (graph S1.10). In contrast, New Zealand Maori had a median personal income which was 82.4% of that for all New Zealanders in 1996 (SNZ 1997b, 1997c).

Indigenous people in Tasmania and Victoria came closest to income parity with all Australians, receiving 84.0% and 80.0%, respectively, of the median income of total persons in each State. At the other extreme, Indigenous people in the Northern Territory had a median income only 47.2% of that for the total population in that Territory.



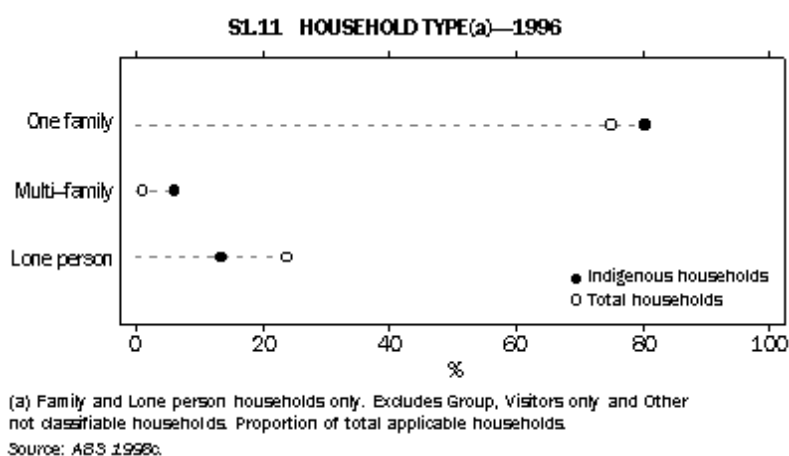
## Households and housing

A household is defined in the census as a group of people who usually reside and eat together. Households are further classified into family and non-family households, the latter defined as either groups of unrelated individuals or people living alone. An Indigenous household is defined as a family household where the reference person or spouse is Indigenous or a lone person household where the lone person is Indigenous. The concept of Indigenous household does not apply to group households. There were 94,931 Indigenous family and lone person households in 1996. Of these, 55.9% comprised only Indigenous people, with the remainder a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (ABS 1998c).

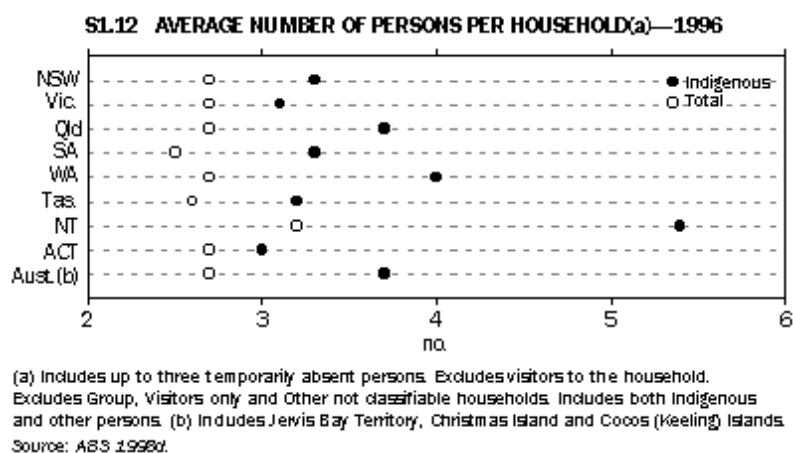
## Type of household



A greater proportion of Indigenous households (86.6%) than of total households (76.2%) were family households (graph S1.11). Indigenous households were also more likely to be multi-family households than were total households. In 1996, 6.2% of Indigenous family households contained two or more families, while the corresponding figure for all households was only 1.2%. Nearly half (45.0%) of all three-family households were Indigenous households.



Irrespective of the number of families in a household, Indigenous households had more residents on average than other households. Overall, there were 3.7 persons per Indigenous household, one person more than in all households (graph S1.12). On average, Indigenous households in the Northern Territory had the most persons per household at 5.4. Indigenous households in the ACT and Victoria were closest in size to total households with 3.0 and 3.1 persons per household on average.



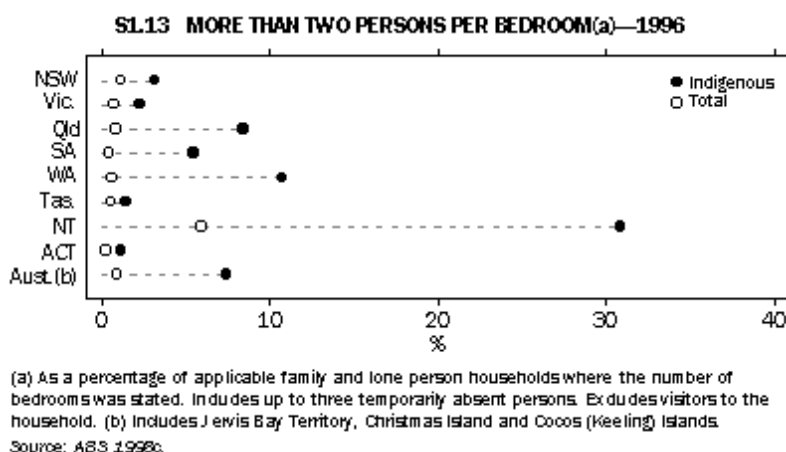
The additional residents in Indigenous households are partly explained by the number of children resident in family households. Of those Indigenous family households with children aged under 15, 15.2% had 4 or more children while only 5.1% of total family households had the same number of children (ABS 1998c).

## People per bedroom

Given the larger size of Indigenous households, it is probable that housing stress would affect

more Indigenous households than other households. Of Indigenous households, where the number of bedrooms was stated, 7.5% had more than two persons to each bedroom compared to 1.0% of total family and lone person households (graph S1.13).

Although proportionally more Indigenous than other households had more than two persons per bedroom in every State and Territory, the extent of this varied widely across States and Territories. More than two people per bedroom were most common in the Northern Territory for both Indigenous and total households, accounting for 30.9% of Indigenous households and 6.0% of total households. Western Australia (10.8%) and Queensland (8.5%) had the next highest proportions among Indigenous households.



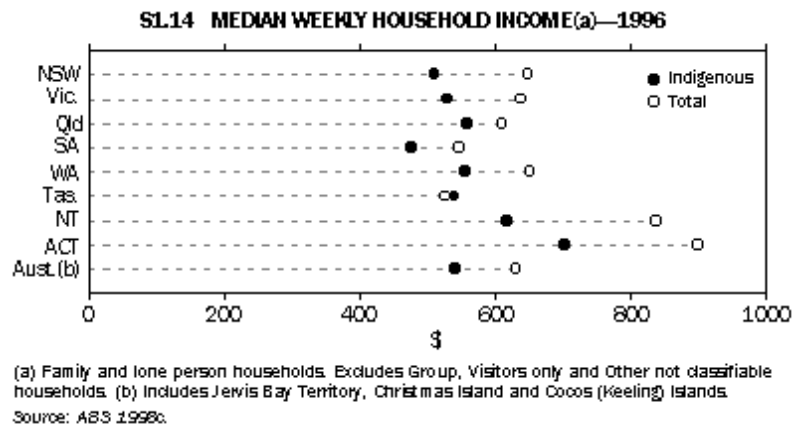
## Tenure

The rate of home ownership among Indigenous households was much lower than for all family and lone person households. The homes of only 30.8% of Indigenous households were either fully owned or being purchased; the corresponding figure for all households was 70.0% (ABS 1998c).

Of the 63.8% of Indigenous households who were renting their homes, nearly identical proportions were renting from private landlords and real estate agents (36.9%) and Government agencies (36.5%). In contrast, 65.5% of total renting households were renting from private landlords and real estate agents. Community and co-operative housing organisations were landlords for 15.7% of renting Indigenous households; by comparison only 1.9% of all renting households were renting from this type of landlord. Community and co-operative housing organisations were landlords to renting Indigenous households most often in rural areas (ABS 1998c).

## Household income

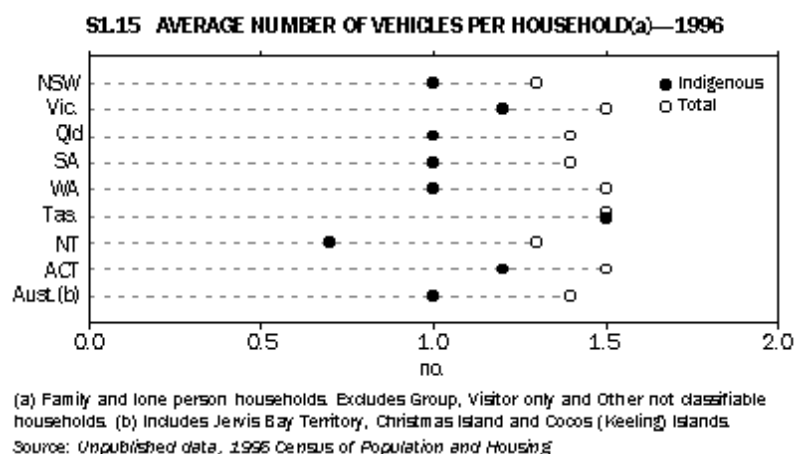
Although there was, on average, one more person in Indigenous households (3.7) than in all households (2.7), median household income was \$540 per week, \$90 less than in all households (graph S1.14). Median household income varied across States and Territories. Although Indigenous households in the Northern Territory contained 5.4 people on average, two more than total households, median income for Indigenous households was over \$200 less than for total households. While median household income is relatively higher for Indigenous households in the Northern Territory than elsewhere, this is accounted for by the fact that Indigenous households in the NT were the largest of any State or Territory. The size of Indigenous households was smallest in the ACT, but median household income was highest.



## Number of vehicles

Access to services such as schools, hospitals, legal services and government agencies is a complex issue involving distance to service centres, the availability of private and public transport, infrastructure such as roads and highways, and the cost of vehicles and fuel. For cultural minorities, there are additional complex cultural barriers which can impair access. The only variable related to access to services obtainable from the census is a measure of the availability of private transport. The census asks each household for the number of vehicles garaged at a dwelling on census night.

There was one vehicle on average for each Indigenous household, 0.4 less than for all households (graph S1.15). For total households, the number of vehicles ranged between 1.3 to 1.5 for all States and Territories. However, only in Tasmania did the average number of vehicles for Indigenous households equal that for all households. Indigenous households in the Northern Territory averaged the fewest number (0.7) of vehicles per household.



## Further information

More information about the census characteristics of Indigenous Australians is available in 1996 Census of Population and Housing: Indigenous Profile (2020.0), a set of 26 tables for various geographic areas ranging from individual communities to ATSI Regions, and 1996 Census of Population and Housing: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (2034.0-8), a set of publications for each State and Territory and Australia.

Other data relating to population issues can be found in Experimental Estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population 30 June 1991-30 June 1996 (3230.0) and Experimental Projections of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population 30 June 1996-30 June 2006 (3231.0).

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ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics  
SNZ Statistics New Zealand

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